DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 618 SP 018 874

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TITLE The Ontario Secondary Education Review Project: An Analysis of a Provincial Strategy for Educational Change in the 1980's in the Province of Ontario, Canada.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the INTEC Conference on Educational Change (The Hague, The Netherlands, April 1, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advisory Committees; Decision Making; *Educational Assessment; Educational Change; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Planning; Foreign Countries; Futures (of Society); Relevance (Education); *Secondary Education; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario

ABSTRACT

A study was developed in an effort to generate a series of reports dealing with assessment, evaluation, reaction, and design of secondary education programs in the Canadian province of Ontario. The study objectives included: (1) defining educational goals commensurate with student ability; (2) preparing students for the future; (3) reassessing former educational goals and adjusting the program to meet new goals; (4) insuring better preparation of students for the work world; and (5) meeting the educational needs of students at various levels of ability. Reacting to growing criticism concerning the inadequacies of the present educational system, the Secondary Education Review Project created four committees to provide the functions of steering, evaluation, reaction, and design. Although the project is ongoing and no conclusions can yet be drawn, a number of success and failure factors that are thought to have potential influence on the project include involvement of interest groups, minority government, economic recession, and unemployment. (JN)

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THE ONTARIO SECONDARY EDUCATION REVIEW PROJECT

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ANALYSIS OF A PROVINCIAL STRATEGY

for

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

in the

1980's

in

THE PROVINCE OF ONTARIO, CANADA

Presented at the

IMTEC Conference on Educational Change

The Hague, The Netherlands

April 1, 1981

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THE ONTARIO SECONDARY EDUCATION REVIEW PROJECT

Introduction

On April 14, 1980 Dr. B. Stephenson, Minister of Education for the Province of Ontario announced that her ministry would commence an in-depth one-year study of secondary school education in this province. The mandate of the study group is to generate a series of sequential reports dealing with assessment, evaluation, reaction, and design culminating in recommendations that will indicate the ways and means whereby secondary education can operate in the best interests of students and society in the twenty-first century. The project includes the following objectives:

a) to focus on the needs and goals of secondary students commensurate with their levels of ability;

b) to set the criteria for a program which prepares students for the futures envisaged by society;

c) to assess the goals of education, and to realign the secondary school program to ensure that the goals and programs are compatible and viable;

d) to re-design the program to better prepare students for the world of work;

e) to consider the structure of Intermediate and Senior Divisions with respect to the characteristics of adolescents and the problem of mobility of students within, and to or from the Province;

f) to assess such features as the credit system, required subject policy, and diploma requirements;

g) to devise means to provide appropriate educational programs that include courses at various levels of difficulty to meet the needs of students with different interests and aptitudes;

h) to respond to concerns regarding standards and discipline in secondary schools.

Background

To appreciate the setting that has resulted in a project of this magnitude one

must have a glimpse at the major educational developments in Ontario over the past few years.

Parents, frightened by continual publicity about the illiteracy of their children are demanding a return to the Three R's. Professional educators are increasingly of the view that innovation has outdistanced value. Politicians, with an eye to the public purse, demand the development of skills to ensure employability.

To what are these groups reacting? After all the 60's and 70's saw full-time enrollment figures for all levels of schooling increase to the point that one out of every three Canadians was attending an educational institution and in secondary schools the retention rate was about 90%.

In the same period there was a lot of talk about educational radicalism and innovation as exemplified by Ivan Illich. The 1968 Hall-Dennis Report--the result of one of Ontario's two royal commissions on education of that time--a report on the aims and objectives of education was considered to be the harbinger of a new progressivism of the John Dewey variety. The needs and interests of school children were taken into account. Students, teachers, and parents demanded a larger role in formulating educational policy and making educational decisions. Demands were made for more "relevant" curriculum and more student choice in courses of study.

Ontario reacted by creating a virtually unstructured secondary school curriculum, with, in effect, the minimal regulation that a student must complete 27 or 33 credits to obtain one of the two graduation diplomas. The choice was open--the parent or student if "of age"--had the final authority of decision regarding courses. As the 70's wore on some vestige of structure was returned. However, the schools could best be described as "client-oriented".

At the same time, free-schools on the model of A.S. Neill's Summerhill sprang up, fizzled and have now reappeared in direct contrast to Neill's philosophy in a highly structured mode and usually with a strong religious orientation. They are commonly seen

as a real threat to the public system which is already in decline.

Why did so little come of the reform ferment? For one thing the failure of the economy to fulfil its promises undercut the promises of an ever-expanding system. Severe problems were posed by the very large pool of young people and older women entering the job market already shrunken by recession. It has become apparent that many of the reforms were merely superficial manipulation. It is also now felt that the media had the effect of blowing out of proportion the number of people actually desiring educational change (Wilson, 1977).

Professor Daly of McMaster University foresaw the present situation as early as 1969 when he wrote as follows in criticism of the Hall-Dennis Report:

> There is always a discrepancy between what people expect and what they are willing to pay. Everyone wants more and more from government; fewer and fewer are willing to pay for it. To bathe in the illusion of far greater expenditure, and to encourage the public to expect results, beyond the dreams of avarice, is to play with the future of the whole system. If people come to expect miracles, and see no sign of them, the result would be a subtle but massive growth of resentment which would deeply shake public confidence in the whole process of education. (1969)

Daly's prophecy has come true. Reacting to free subject choice, lower skill levels in the Three R's, increased unemployment of recent undergraduates, increased vandalism, increased drop-out rates, higher incidence of severe discipline cases, drug use and alcoholism the populace through the opposition parties in a minority government has demanded reform. The "massive growth of resentment" is no longer subtle and is clearly at hand.

Thus, the Ministry of Education has reacted with the Secondary Education Review Project and an indication that faith in education as a panacea for society's ills still persists!

The Project--A Description

The project involves four committees drawn from a broad range of public, professional and student interests. The committees will address the foregoing objectives and

will produce a series of reports which will culminate in recommendations that will indicate the ways and means whereby secondary education can be reshaped to better serve the interests of students and society.

The Steering Committee will be active throughout the project. It is responsible for producing the Assessment Report, overseeing all phases of the project, and submitting final recommendations to the Minister.

The Assessment Report will identify existing issues and problems relating to secondary education, assess these issues and problems in their present context, and comment on possible future directions.

On completion of the Assessment Report, the project will move through three successive phases--Evaluation, Reaction, and Design.

During the Evaluation phase, a Symposium was held in which about 300 citizens representing the full spectrum of the Ontario community took part. Speakers of national and international stature addressed key issues identified in the Assessment Report. The Evaluation Committee will produce an Evaluation Report which will both reflect the issues raised in the Assessment Report and draw upon input from the symposium, contemporary opinions and research data.

The Reaction Committee is composed entirely of members drawn from the general public including students. It will develop a report reflecting the reaction of the general public to the two previous reports.

The Design Committee, whose members are professional educators, will study and review the previous reports and all other input to the project. The committee will then prepare a report which will outline the role of secondary education and indicate means whereby this role may be realized. This report will be released as a discussion paper for validation and comment throughout the province.

On the basis of the validation reactions, the Steering Committee will prepare a recommended blueprint for secondary education and submit it to the Minister of Education.

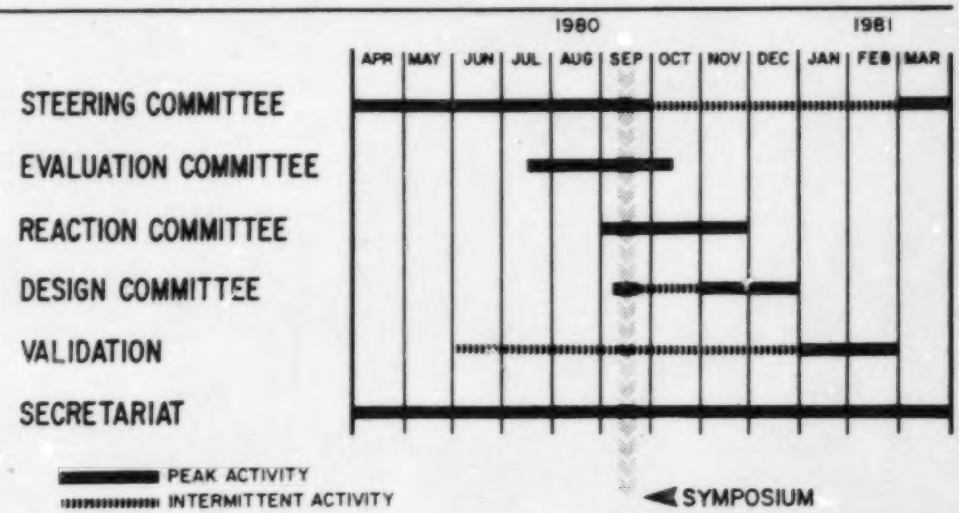
During the project, pertinent existing studies both from within and from without the province will be examined, opinions and reactions will be sought, and informed predictions about future trends will be considered.

Written submission from individuals and organization will be encouraged (at the time of writing approximately 400 such submissions have been received).

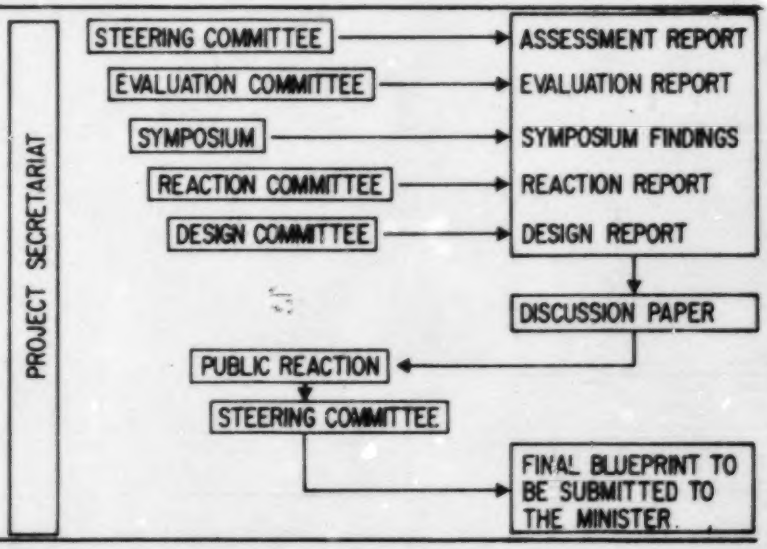
The project is directed by five senior educators seconded as a full-time Secretariat.

The following figures indicate the committees, their functions, and time lines.

Secondary Education Review Project



Secondary Education Review Project



Change Analysis

In order that any innovation have some chance of success the homeostatic forces--those with the tendency to maintain the status quo--must be recognized and mobilized into a set of positive influences.

At the beginning of this project it was recognized that two major forces would be homeostatic in nature. One of these can best be described as being comprised of those groups which had strong vested interests in the present system. In the main these emanate from the professional education community, i.e., teachers' federations; particular subject area groups; the post-secondary community; the pre-secondary community. It was recognized that with these groups there was the potential for considerable resistance. In order to transform this into a potentially positive force all such groups were recognized and represented on one or more of the major committees and at the Symposium. The call for position papers was widely made but a special effort was directed at these groups and oral presentations were encouraged. Involvement became the key term.

Whereas these groups might be considered as internal variables in the system the second major potentially negative influence can be considered external. In this sense it must be considered a parameter to the system and thus a constraint. The force in question is the economic system. In a world of decline and economic recession costly innovation is doomed to failure. In order to maintain a sense of balance in the discussions members of the economic community, e.g., from the Ontario Economic Council, were included in the committees and in the Symposium. The legislature was informed of the activities when deemed advisable and the cabinet was kept up-to-date when economic factors were concerned. The task became one of considering the economic realities as constraints. This necessitated open two-way communication among all groups and individuals within the project.

Two major unanticipated sets of forces have developed since the project's inception. These will either hinder the success of the activity or at best serve as

severe constraints on broad innovations. One can be described as historical and the other as political.

The fact that our original constitution, the BNA act of 1867, recognized the two major religious communities in the country at the time and enshrined their rights in law has created in this province a dual system comprised of the Public System which is non-denominational and the Separate System which is Catholic. The Public System is fully funded from the public purse; the Separate System is only partially funded. The Catholic forces have siezed this opportunity to push their cause for full funding. As the ratio of Catholic to non-Catholic approaches 1:1 such forces must increasingly be given serious hearings by the government.

The second force, that described as political, is also external to the educational system per se in the sense that it derives its strength from the current political struggles in the country surrounding the question of re-patriation of our constitution. Province has been pitted against province and all provinces against the federal government. The issues created by the bilingual nature of our country and the minority language rights in Ontario, i.e., French, have become major ones in the constitutional battle. Those involved at that level have also grasped this opportunity to bring their case to the fore.

Neither of these major forces, although recognized at the beginning, was considered to be as demanding of attention as is now the case.

The project is still in its early stages. In fact it is now behind its schedule and is likely to finalize its report from 2 to 6 months late. The following table indicates some of the factors, both positive and negative, that appear to be influencing the project. The same factors may appear in both columns. In general the degree to which such factors will be positive or negative or both will depend on external influences and the actual recommendations.

Success Factors (+)	Failure Factors (-)
1. Involvement of interest groups	1. Economic recession
2. Attitude toward authority	2. Unemployment
3. Minority government	3. Federal/Provincial relations
4. Trade-off with labor	4. Aging population
5. Federal/Provincial relations	5. Vested interest groups
6. U.S. neo-conservative movement	6. Neo-conservatism
7. Provincial election	7. Religious pluralism
	8. Provincial election

Strategy Design

The future of the project is fairly predictable as far as process is concerned. At this point, however, the nature of the recommendations is still unknown since they have not been formulated. After having read the recommendations from all briefs submitted and the major papers from the Symposium this author can only conclude that the direction coming from the project will be conservative and reactionary. Hopefully they will, in spite of this gloomy prediction, at least lay the foundation and structure for further change that will eventually come as a result of our electronic and communications revolution.

Once the Minister receives the report, probably between September and December 1981, she will no doubt make it public in some form in order to obtain reactions and analysis. At least the major educational bodies including the trustees, the teachers and the administrators will be involved, as well might the Ontario Economic Council. Eventually it will be her decision or that of the Cabinet or Legislature as the issue demands, as to what will be implemented. When the decisions have been made, the Ministry will, through its normal mechanisms redraft the policy documents. Implementation will then be the responsibility of the Education Officers of the Ministry and local officials. If the recommendations are major in scope or multitudinous there may be a position created to oversee the implementation.

In any event it is safe to say that some change will come about. The degree to which it will be truly innovative or, as Michael Katz has said of an earlier time, it

will be "moving objects around in a box but not altering the box itself," (1975) remains to be seen.

It can be concluded however that the design of the project is sound. It includes a high degree of involvement amongst all concerned and a sincere attempt to recognize and manipulate all recognizable factors.

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